

A Web of Lies

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Summary: A Sangheili Ultra with the Home Guard finds what it means to be truly betrayed. Through Shame and Imprisonment, he also finds that being betrayed has its later benefits... Rated M for language, violence, and suggestive themes.

1. Prologue: The Breaking Point

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Location: 'Zar Keep grounds, Rezukh'n Tropical Rainforest, State of Hezan, Continent of Shiaalo, Western Hemisphere, Sangheilios' Equator

Date: June 21, 2526

Local Time: 06:45 hours

A Sangheili clad in the filigree armor of the Keep Guard sighed as yet another early-morning storm rolled over his head. "For just one day, just one, I wish that we would get sunlight for more than two consecutive hours," the Ultra said. An underling, and warrior transferred from a neighboring Keep in their Union, chortled at his side.

"Surely, after living in this environment for twenty-seven years, you are used to it? Come now, brother, it could be worse; we could be stationed in Bygrezji, where it never rains!" He idly shook some of the mud from his boots, laughing again as he realized the action. "It is the mud, is it not? You tire of wiping that armor each day?"

"It is a pain, you must admit." He snapped his mandibles, knocking some collected water away, only for it to be replaced. Every day was, in fact, the same as the last; the two would rise at 0500 hours, begin their patrol at 0545 in the rain and finish to their station at the entrance of the main Keep tower at 0700. By this time,

they were walking along the exterior of the northern wall when their routine was broken.

"Brother, look, up the road. Someone approaches," his companion whispered. The Ultra looked and nodded, confirming the sighting.

"Go warn the kaidon about our guest. I shall keep him at the gates until you return." He was thankful for the break in monotony as his friend ran toward the main tower, mud and water splashing beneath his boots with every stride. The Ultra took a few steps up the road to greet the stranger, a hand ready to unclip the outdated Type-25 rifle on his right thigh. The figure wore a hooded cloak, his hands crossed loosely within his sleeves. "Halt! One step further and you will be trespassing on 'Zar Keep grounds! Turn back immediately, or state your business," he called.

"I am but a messenger, sir. I have no intention of bringing harm to your keep."

The comm unit buzzed quietly in his ear. "Well," he demanded quietly.

"_The kaidon says to allow him entrance. If he has come this far, we should, at the very least, allow him refuge from the weather._"

"Forgive my outburst, stranger. It is nothing more than standard procedure," he said, beckoning the man to follow him. The hooded figure simply bowed his head once in a nod and followed him in silence. He scowled as they followed his companion's muddy hoofprints through Red Granite-lined hallways; the groundskeeper would not be pleased, for the mud in these parts stuck to the tropical wood like glue. They reached a checkpoint, where the cloak finally came off to reveal an average-build warrior wearing the black and gold armor of an Ascetic. Their blades and rifles were confiscated, as was tradition, and allowed to pass. "So stranger, what brings an Ascetic such as you to our rainy Keep?"

"Business."

"Our neighbors did not send word-"

"I am not from your Union, sir. I was sent by someone with greater authority than my own." The Ultra's companion was at the door waiting for them, and he opened it to reveal the aged kaidon standing before the full-sized window at the back of his office.

"What message do you bring, stranger?"

"Kaidon Raka 'Baezar, I bring a message from the High Council of Masters. They demand that you cease all operations within your Union, or face a harsh punishment. This is the final straw, kaidon; you have denied them far too many times."

Raka growled. "I have denied them, because we are doing nothing wrong. Now, something I do not tolerate is someone threatening me, my keep, or my neighbors." He looked to the Ultra and nodded when the Ascetic shrugged and turned to walk out.

"Your mistake, kaidon. You will know your punishment when it

arrives."

The Ultra tilted his head when the Ascetic exited. "Are you certain?"

"You question my authority, Ultra?"

"No, milord."

"I want you to follow him for three miles, it is there that I want you to remove his head and take it back to the Council. I will not give up what we have simply because they feel threatened."

The Ultra bowed his head and began following the cloaked man upon retrieving his swords. He did as requested and followed the Ascetic for exactly three miles before calling at his back, "Stranger! The kaidon has a message for the Council!" He drew his steel single-edge blades when the Ascetic turned to face him.

"Killing a messenger is a serious offense, sir. That, and my blades would simply cut through yours." The Ultra tossed the blade in his left hand, the red metal glinting as the rain suddenly ceased and a single sun broke through the cloud cover. "So be it," he said, reaching for the hilt when the blade stuck in the ground.

The Ultra could tell that the Ascetic had trained in the art of ancient steel blades, for his stance and form was perfect, unlike his own; he had the stance, but what was still learning the proper way to hold the blade. They both reached out and touched the ends of their blades together, bowing their heads as the blades lowered. Distant thunder rumbled as they stared each other down, one waiting for the other to make the first move. The Ascetic let his arrogant impatience get the better of him, and charged the Ultra while the latter raised his blade defensively and waited. They met in a flurry of red slashes and sparks. Curses flowed from the Ascetic's mouth each time the Ultra parried his blows and pushed him back.

The Ultra smirked, for his opponent was losing strength now; he may have been practiced, but had no experience with the blade. The Xek'trei Union's Keep guard, however, held quarterly tournaments to see who would receive promotions, demotions, or be ousted in the event of one's death; the Ultra had participated in these tournaments since he reached the appropriate age, and had been demoted many times before his recent winning streak and promotion to Ultra. He allowed the Ascetic to charge one final time and when the Ascetic swung, the Ultra sidestepped, sliced off his opponent's hands and kicked him to the ground. "You have been crippled, stranger. Do you accept defeat?"

He looked to the bleeding stumps where his hands used to be and sighed, "Yes. What was your message?"

"Stand up." The Ascetic complied and looked to the sky, for he knew what was coming next. He closed his eyes with a smile as the Ultra's blade touched his neck briefly before leaving it. "May the greatest of Warriors greet you at the Gates of Paradise, brother." With that, he felt one final sting before his world became forever silent.

Location: City-State of Tarasun, Council Chambers

Date: July 3, 2526

Local Time: 13:04 hours

High Councilor Ralo 'Grodasee looked up at the sound of commotion outside the meeting hall. He looked to his fellows with a brow raised. "Perhaps our messenger returns with bad news," one of them suggested.

"Did you not hear me, swine? You cannot just barge into the Council Chamber without them allowing you access! One more step and I will be forced to take action!" There was a resounding crash, followed by a cry and a dull thump. Ralo stood as the doors opened to reveal a warrior in blood- and mud-coated filigree armor of a Keep guard.

"I told you, officer, I am here on Council businessâ€¦but you refused to listen," the newcomer said to a fallen security officer as the Honor Guards before the Council podiums tensed. The smell of blood followed the man, and the source was made apparent when he tossed a leather bag in the middle of the floor.

"What is this?" Ralo demanded shortly.

"The response to your demand, your Excellences," He knelt down and opened the bag, only to pull out a severed head. A face Ralo knew all too well.

"Arrest him!" The man looked around, confused at the order.

"What have I done that warrants arrest? I am but a messenger for my kaidon."

"Just as he was. You are charged with the murder of an Azr'sju operative, guardsman. Take him to a holding cell this instant!"

In the weeks that followed, the Ultra was stripped bare and beaten into submission by people he knew to be criminals hired by the Councilor that had ordered his arrest. On the thirty-fifth day of his imprisonment, his body ached from malnutrition and the bruises he had received. He was surprised when a hatch at the bottom of his door slid open and a cooked cut of meat was offered. "Take it and back away from the door, criminal." He snatched the plate and set about shredding the meat between his jaws as the door opened fully; the dim light was nearly blinding.

Councilor Hefa 'Xardonee looked on the broken man in mild disgust and pity; never before had a criminal been treated with such conviction and hatred. Those charged with murder were usually just executed and the body burned, only for the ashes to be scattered in the wind and given back to Sangheilius; even criminals deserved to be treated as if they still had the honor they threw away in their impulsive act. "I hope it is to your likingâ€¦" The man nodded quickly, his pale cobalt eyes glowing in the dim light, "Good, because it will likely be your final meal. Stand, if you are able, and follow me." They walked through the damp and dark hallways until Hefa stopped at a metal door and opened it. "Now, you will bathe and make yourself presentable for the trial."

"If I may make an inquiry," the man said weakly. When the Councilor

nodded, "What would the point be, if you are just going to take my life?"

"Because, boy, we do things differently here. Unlike you, we kill the unjust while allowing them to keep some of their dignity."

"Then, why the beatings and starvation?"

"It was not my decision. Enough questions, boy. Bathe."

He watched as the man dipped into the water with a hiss. "_Fre'juz_! This water is well below freezing!" The Councilor simply crossed his arms and frowned, nodding toward an open box of different soaps. The man took a deep breath and set about cleansing his hide as quickly as he could; he would pause often to shiver before continuing. "Do you watch all of the prisoners as they bathe for the final time?"

"I have seen much worse in my time, boy, believe me. I have a question for you, off the record." The man nodded as he dressed in the robes that were provided, "Did you properly, and traditionally, dispose of the body?"

"Of course I did. And, if it is any consolation, it was not murder. We dueled in the traditional way, and I emerged victorious. I did not really get to defend myself when I arrivedâ€!"

Hefa sighed. "I see. I will share this information with the other Councilors and see about getting your charge droppedâ€|_however_, High Councilor 'Grodasee has the power to override our judgment and have you executed anyway." The hope that appeared in the man's eyes vanished just as quickly as it had appeared, and the pity for him grew. "I know you are being honest and that you were only practicing your right to defend your keep's honor. I am sorry, boy, but this is the way the Council operates. Follow me to the Chambers." As they reached the top of the stairs, the sound of voices could be heard beyond the wooden door. Hefa turned and said, "What is your name, boy?"

"Dran 'Rukzar, your Excellency."

"Wait for your name to be called before entering."

Dran nodded and the Councilor walked through the door, leaving him alone. _"Well, this is how I meet my end? Executed by an overzealous High Councilor simply because I bested one of his political messengers in battleâ€|what has our kind become?"_ He looked at the door when the talking outside ceased and the Councilor that had escorted him called, "Enter the accused, Dran 'Rukzar!" He was stopped by a security officer â€" the same he had knocked out, in fact â€" and shackled at the wrists. He was led to the center of the room, ambassadors and dignitaries from all over Sangheilius whispering excitedly as he was chained to the floor.

Ralo stood and spoke, "Dran 'Rukzar, you are charged with the murder of an _Azr'sju _agent. How do you plea?"

"Not guilty," he mumbled.

"I did not hear you, criminal. Speak loudly enough for everyone to hear."

"I said 'not guilty', " he rasped.

"Even in light of the evidence stacked against you?"

"Yes."

Hefa stood, "High Councilor, if I may speakâ€|" Ralo scowled, but nodded once. "It has come to my attention that the accused bested the agent in a duel; fair combat. In light of this, I agree with his plea of not guilty."

More excited whispering broke out as Hefa retook his seat. "Silence! And you believe this nonsense, Councilor 'Xardonee?'"

"The accused sounded sincere enough when he confessed that to me earlier." Dran fought the urge to smirk at the lower-ranking Councilor's snide tone. Ralo soon called for the others to make their decisions before making his own, and eight of the ten Councilors decided that Dran was guilty.

"Majority rules in favor of this Council. Dran 'Rukzar, you are hereby found guilty of murder in the 1st degree. Guard, take him away and bring in the next one."

"Did I murder him, or show him mercy?" Dran suddenly shouted.

"Mercy," Ralo repeated, confused.

"Yes, mercy. Did I show him mercy by killing him, so that he would never have to deal with the corrupt group of individuals that sit on their collective asses and talk politics, as if they know what is happening on our world?"

"Hmm, on second thoughtâ€|Dran 'Rukzar, your murder charge has been dropped. You are now charged and found guilty of heresy. Take him to the interrogation chambers and have him prepared to receive the Marks."

Hefa stood as Dran was escorted out and the whispers broke out again. "What? This is ridiculous, High Councilor! You go too far!"

"Silence Hefa, lest you join him." Ralo smirked in a way the crowd couldn't see and spoke lowly enough for only the Councilors to hear, "The only reason you defended him is because your wife is from that region."

"I am sorry, brother," the security officer said as he pushed Dran to his knees and chained him to the floor. "I would rather die than have to live with the Mark."

"Shut up. You have a choice," Dran growled. The officer looked back one last time, almost apologetically, before leaving him alone. He simply sat there, mentally preparing himself for the torture that was sure to come. Much to his surprise, High Councilor 'Grodasee, Councilor 'Xardonee, and a young girl entered the room and stood before him.

"Kara, my dear, this is the one who killed your brother. Would you

like to witness his punishment?" The girl looked up at Ralo, confused.

"Oh, you are a sick bastard, Councilor. This is not something a child should have to witness, most definitely not a female," Dran spat. The High Councilor slowly walked over, lifted his hand, and brought the back of it down to smack him with enough force to make Dran's head connect with the cold stone floor.

"I agree. Your daughter will not take part in this; it is immoral," Hefa said, already pushing the girl through the threshold.

"So be it," Ralo said to himself. "This means I get to have moreâ€|fun." He walked over to a weapon rack and grabbed a whip Dran knew to be Dekutresi. From the handle was twelve inches of woven leather, which then broke apart into nine fifteen-inch sections, or tails. On the end of each tail was a sharpened stone, or in this particular case, the same crystals used in the Type-31 Marksman Rifle. "By the time I am through with you, you are going to beg to join your brothers and sisters in the Hell that will be unleashed upon them."

Dran screamed as the first strike tore into his hide, the pink crystals adding to the pain of his wounds. He screamed until his backside was nothing more than a mess of raw meat and purple blood. When the Councilor was satisfied with his handiwork, he moved to pass Dran to grab a new weapon, but not before the latter bit the former's unprotected forearm. Ralo howled and struck Dran across the left side of the face, only three of the tails finding their mark. Dran let loose a bloodcurdling howl and thrashed against his bindings as blood flowed freely from the new cuts on his face and from his ruptured left eye. Ralo watched with perverse satisfaction at the writhing form, only to huff when his captive went still, unconscious.

Dran groaned loudly as he reawakened, the sound rising into a scream as he felt the burning sensation on his bandaged chest and left hand. In fact, his entire back and the left side of his face were bandaged now. "They really want to keep me aliveâ€|" He looked around as best he could, and found that he was chained to the floor in the middle of the Command Deck of a ship. "Ah, you are awake. It is about time," Ralo said flatly. "Hefa, hold his head in place, please. I do not want him to miss the assault."

"I am sorry. Truly, I am," Hefa whispered in Dran's ear, "I could not get him to change his mind."

"If I survive, I assure you that your death will be quick and painless," Dran growled back, Hefa simply nodding in acceptance.

"And now, to begin with a short conversation," Ralo keyed a glyph at his control panel, and a picture of Raka 'Baezar popped up on the screen. "Kaidon 'Baezar, this is the Undeniable Resolve. We have been ordered by the Council to bring Dran 'Rukzar back to your keep, and they would like to inform you that after today, all demands to cease your operations will come to an end, and also apologize for holding your Guardsman for so long."

"This is 'Baezar, to Undeniable Resolve. Send them my thanks and apologies, Shipmaster. You have clearance to enter 'Zar Keep

airspace."—

"Thank you, Kaidon. Out." Ralo turned to a soldier manning another station, "Get the forward batteries charged and ready and the glassing beam ready, as well. Just in case."

"Right away, your Excellency."

"And now, to destroy your world, just as you destroyed mine," Ralo said lowly, still looking at the viewscreen as a familiar keep came into view.

"Batteries are already at ninety percent, your Excellency."

"Good," Ralo said, zooming in on an obviously-pregnant woman waving up at the ship. "Tell me, Dran, who this is."

"You fucking bastard! You will burn in the pits of Hell for this!"

Ralo smirked and turned back to the viewscreen, Dran's response being just what he had wanted to hear. "She is quite attractive. You made a good choice

"No!" The woman was gone in a flash of blue-green fire, and that was all Dran could see for the remainder of the bombardment; that one image was burned into his mind as they moved on to the other twenty-two keeps in the Xek'trei Union. Hefa had released his head halfway through the ordeal, not only seeing that Dran could not turn away as his world burned, but because he was about to explode with grief himself; he was very close to some of those people, as well.

Only when the evil deed was finished did Dran sink to the floor and weep. "Yes, cry like a foolish child. Mourn your lost loved ones," Ralo mocked. "General, I apologize for having to waste your ship's energy on such filth. I will find some way to repay you."

"No worries, your Excellency. Purge the weak and hopeless, I say."

"My sentiments exactly, General. Have this vermin taken to High Charity and placed in a cell with other Heretics like him."

"Yes, your Excellency." The General surveyed the damage as Ralo left, crossing his arms behind his back. "Humph, such a waste of potential. It truly is a shame," he said, more to himself than to Dran. "Oh, stop that weeping. It is pathetic. No wonder you chose the Home Guard over Covenant service; you would not be able to bear the loss of a single brother. Major 'Wexekee, get this heap out of my way." Dran heard a fist thump against armor before he was roughly dragged through several corridors; he was so crippled with grief, he couldn't bring himself to stand. The last thing he remembered was being stuffed in an empty supply crate and being kicked in the gut before his world went dark and silent. He was exhausted from his beating and blood loss, and he soon lost consciousness.

Chapter I: Hell is Darker than the Darkest Night

Location: High Charity, Cellblock 7B-2

Date: July 9, 2526

Local Time: 10:12 hours

A woman with a hide in the palest shade of tan and violet eyes looked irritably to her cellmate as he gasped excitedly. "Back away from the door, you obnoxious fool," the guard spat, pointing a Needler into the threshold while his companion waited at the door controls. The armed guard nodded and holstered the weapon when her cellmate complied nervously. "No, you are not being released. Instead, we brought the both of you some company. Enjoy," he said, the two of them practically throwing the still body of a nude, umber-skinned male onto the floor.

"Oh! A new roommate! Can he be our friend, Mira? Can he?"

"Ryu," she croaked scornfully. It was all she could manage, for the San 'Shyuum had ordered her vocal cords to be destroyed as part of her sentencing; they hadn't fully succeeded, however. The youngling, not even old enough for Covenant service, immediately fell silent and sat on his bunk. She huffed at her cellmate and moved over to the bandaged form, and gently shook his shoulder. She thought nothing of his nudity, for all of the prisoners were not allowed any form of clothing; clothing meant that makeshift weapons could be hidden.

The man opened his right eye a crack, looked around tiredly, and promptly closed it again with a barely audible sigh. "Leave me alone," he rasped; there was absolutely no strength in his voice.

"Hurt?" she said, gently prodding the blood-soaked bandage on his back. The man hissed and nodded slowly. "Ryu, bunk, carefully." The boy eagerly stood and moved to place his hands under the man's arms, but the man snapped at him.

"Leave me alone," he repeated. She nodded to Ryu, and the boy retook his seat. They watched as the man crawled slowly toward a third and empty bunk on the far side of the cell, grunting with every muscle moved.

"Mira, we should help him, whether he likes it or not," Ryu whispered quickly; why the boy was so excited, she wasn't sure. They certainly had nothing to be excited about; heresy was a serious charge, and something told her that Ryu was innocentâ€¦that, or he was just a dimwitted child that had done something so heinous without actually realizing it.

She nodded and walked over to the fallen man again. "Help." The man shook his head slowly, but she repeated herself with more force. He growled, albeit weakly, and kept crawling. She growled back, with much more strength than he could muster, and he suddenly stopped. "Help."

"Fine," he sighed. She and Ryu took him up under each arm and set him down on the bunk he had been crawling for. After shifting uncomfortably for a moment, the man's uncovered eye closed and his

breathing became slow.

"What did they do to him, Mira?"

"Torture."

"What did they do, though?" She simply shrugged and looked at the man when he sobbed under his breath; a tear ran out of his closed eye and his mandibles moved without forming words.

"Dream," she said to Ryu's confused look. The boy nodded and they continued to watch the man sleep, leaving him to his nightmare.

"What did they force you to witness?" she thought with a sigh, lying back in her bunk.

"We aren't going to help him anymore?"

"Quiet," she hissed. "Respect, Ryu. Respect." He nodded and followed her notion, lying in his own bunk. Their existence was a lonely and miserable one, but Mira found some odd satisfaction at the fact that she was still alive. Normally, she wouldn't care anything for a newcomer on the first day of their arrival, but this man seemed to have something that others didn't. "Resolve," she thought with a small nod. Even though her speech was greatly hindered, she was determined to discover why this man had been imprisoned.

The man had wept all through the station's Night Cycle, which had kept Mira awake, but she didn't hold it against the man; most, if not all, of the new prisoners — male and female alike — wept on the first night. She waited for that exposed eye to crack open before sitting beside the man on his bunk. "Welcome."

"Ugh, you again." There was more strength in his voice now, but it was still incredibly raspy and quiet. "What did I tell you?"

"Name?" she said softly.

He glared for a moment before sighing and turning onto his side.
"Dran. And yours?"

"Mira," she smiled.

He nodded at the sleeping form across from him, "And the boy?"

"Ryu."

"I am sorry, Mira, but I just want to be left alone. Before you ask, I cannot tell you what has put me in this state—perhaps when I have had some time to move my grief aside?"

She nodded, "Understand."

"Oh! He's awake! Sir, what did you do? What did they do to you?"

"Ryu," Mira said hotly, shaking her head. "Time."

"Yes ma'am."

"Glad to see you keep the boy on a short leash," Dran said lowly, turning over to face the wall, with some difficulty.

Mira saw that he was still bleeding, and nodded in the man's direction upon getting Ryu's attention, "Bandage."

He nodded and moved toward the door. "Excuse me, guard? Could you send a doctor to our cell? The man you put in here yesterday is still bleeding." The guard simply ignored him and kept looking forward. Ryu sighed, "Miraâ€|"

Mira took a deep breath and shouted as best she could, "Guard!"

The Guard finally looked over and allowed a small, albeit fake, smile. "Ah, yes. What is it?"

"Doctor," she croaked.

"Soft on the newcomer, are we? Heh." He turned his head and spoke quietly into his comm unit, "Urai, I need you to send for a doctor to cellblock Seven B Dash Two. One of the newcomers is still bleeding from his wounds, apparently. Yeah, I know," he finished with a quiet scoff. "A doctor is coming."

"Grateful," said with a smile, and the guard nodded. The doctor, one Mira had known before her sentencing, stopped at the cell door and keyed in an emergency code. She looked to Mira questioningly, and the former gestured to Dran.

She knelt at his bedside and spoke quietly, "Are you awake, prisoner?"

"Yes."

"I am here to clean your wounds and replace the bandages. Is that clear?"

"Clean the wounds and replace the bandages, understood." He hissed when she began with the soggy bandages on his back. Blood dripped onto her robes and his sheets, and she gasped quietly at the sight of his back after wiping some of the blood away.

"By the Godsâ€|what did they do to you?"

"They took a Dekutresi to my ass. Hurry up, would you? You are here to work, not make small talk," he spat over his shoulder.

"Doctorsâ€|"

"Dran," Mira scorned shortly.

He sighed, "Apologies."

"No, I understand. Okay, that takes care of your back. If you would, roll onto your back so I can remove the bandage on your face."

He complied with a groan. "Be more careful this time. My eye is ruptured." She nodded and carefully rolled the bandage away. He could tell she was fighting the urge to vomit as she worked to clean the cuts on his face.

"Can you close your eye, please?" He complied and more blood ran down his face. "Oh Gods," she whispered.

"Come on, I do not have all dayâ€|" Mira allowed herself a quiet laugh at his joke, and Ryu decided to share in it. "Glad to see you enjoyed that oneâ€|ah! That shit burns," he hissed.

"The bleeding should stop in a few minutes and the bandages can be removed in a few hours. Welcome to your new life, prisoner."

"Oh, you are funny," he deadpanned before giving a small smile. "Thank you, doctor." She took on a strange look as he closed his exposed eye yet again, but she quickly shrugged and left without another word.

"Erâ€|Dran, was it?"

"Not now, boy."

"Sorryâ€|"

The man wept again on the second night, and Mira caught a name while she listened from her bunk. _"Shriaâ€|it must have been his mother or sister," _she thought just as she heard him whisper the words "my love." She nodded to herself; it made sense, feeling such grief for your significant other after having them taken from you. It was a pain she knew all too well. The third day was uneventful, the three of them sitting or lying in the cell and saying nothing to each other.

Days became weeks, and weeks became five months. Dran had started speaking with them during the second week, only to break the silence, but he mostly kept to himself. Ryu, being as young as he was, still tried to ask Dran what had happened until the latter had actually slammed the former's head into the cell wall. _"Shut the fuck up, child! For one whole day, just be quiet!" _he had said. It had worked, to say the least, for Ryu hadn't so much as looked at the man since.

Finally, after six months and twelve days since Dran's arrival, Mira decided to put her anger for the man aside and speak to him. "Dran. You scared Ryu," she rasped; her ability to speak had improved, but the volume of her voice had considerably dropped.

He glanced at her and sighed. "I know I did. That was my intentionâ€|I just did not mean to take it so far. I am aware that he doesn't understand what it means to lose something that is held dear; he is only a child, after all, butâ€|even in light of that, I could not control my rage. What I was forced to witness is nothing to take lightly."

"What did you see?" He quickly shook his head, a sad grimace forming on his face, but she placed a hand on his shoulder and repeated herself. He scratched at the scars on his face with another sigh and began to tell her of those weeks in full detail. His voice began to quiver and his good eye shone with tears when he reached the portion with the ship.

"S-sheâ€|she waved. Waved right at me, whe-when thatâ€|that _bastard_ ordered the General to fire on the Keep." The young man began to sob,

louder than he had on the first and second night, and Mira pulled him close. Being as old as she was in comparison to him, it felt as though she were comforting one of her sons. She caught Ryu watching them out of the corner of her eye; it seemed that his fear had sobered, perhaps even matured him a bit, because he simply nodded when she looked over. "Gods, I am pathetic!"

"No, Dran, you are not. Grief weighs us all, and yours is a heavy burden. Tell me about this Shria you have mentioned in your sleep." She loosened her embrace and he wiped his face with a sigh.

"There is something I must do first!" Ryu.

The boy didn't even look up; he had suddenly become interested in his hands, "What?"

"Look me in the face, child." Only when the boy had complied did he continue, "I apologize, sincerely, for acting the way I have toward you. You may have gone too far with your questions, but I overreacted. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes. I feel the need to apologize, as well. I did go too far, I see that now. I didn't know what I was doing, really, but you showed me what could happen when too many questions are asked!" perhaps better than the Prophets would ever hope to."

Dran nodded and turned back to Mira. "Do you really wish to hear about my Shria?"

"Yes. It is obvious that you are quite fond of her."

"Ah! she was an amazing woman. I know this sounds naïve, but it felt as though she made the suns rise and set," he paused to chuckle, "I had been in love with her since I was his age." He indicated Ryu. "However, I never had the courage to tell her how I felt; how could I, being a youngling? I eventually worked up the nerve after my first year of practicing with a blade!" perhaps it was arrogance instead of courage! anyway, she told me that she shared in those feelings and we began seeing each other. When I was finished with my training, I was sent to Academy for military training, only to find her waiting for me when I returned. I suppose we were inseparable, because I joined the Home Guard rather than the Covenant, and we married shortly after.

"We waited for three years before actually trying for a child, and she was nearly due when! all of this happened. Astonishing how simply following orders can cost you everything, hmm?"

Mira nodded thoughtfully and realized that he had been holding her hand throughout his story, but she didn't say a word about it. He noticed, too, and he was suddenly embarrassed. "What? You were simply letting go of your demons. There is no need to be embarrassed for it. Besides, I am twice your age and unable to! well, have relations."

"Why?"

"It was! part of my sentencing. I would tell you about it, but it would likely scar you both, and that is something none of us need more of."

"Indeedâ€|" They talked more and more with each new day, and within the next week they conversed and laughed as if they had been a family their entire lives. Even if it was a fallacy, they all admitted that false happiness was better than misery. But, after a year and a half of captivity, Dran had finally had enough. "Miraâ€|why are we sitting in this cell, doing nothing?"

"Because we must," she shrugged.

"Says who? No Sangheili should ever be caged; we either die in battle or are executed for our crimes, or we live and prosper. Even as Heretics, I say we can do the latter just as well as any innocent person."

"Are you suggesting that we escape?" Ryu rumbled; his voice had deepened and he had grown considerably since that first day.

"That is exactly what I am suggesting, my friend."

"Yeah, well, it's impossible. This prison has the best security the Covenant has to offerâ€|that, and we're located at the very bottom of this complex. We would have to either fight or run our way through over forty levels, just to make it to public access."

"And you would know thisâ€|how?"

"Because, I have attempted escape beforeâ€|" Dran looked at him incredulously, but Ryu just shrugged. "Why would I lie?"

"I did not say you were. I simply do not see how you are still alive to tell us about it."

"I guess they think I'm important, or something," he shrugged again, "I don't know. I stopped questioning my existence long ago. I only know that I want out of this place, but I also know that it will never happen, so here I sit, on my ass with you two."

"Ryu, language," Mira scorned.

"Yes ma'am," he sighed. "You better have a really good plan for getting us out of here, or a lousy one that will get us executed. Either one would grant us freedomâ€|why are you both looking at me like that?"

"How did you get out last time, Ryu?" Dran said.

"When they brought me food one evening, I simply shoved the guard down and ran. I managed to get as far as I did because of my speed and climbing ability."

"And now you have strength and height to add to that. I only have one more question to ask you before I begin to build my plan." Ryu nodded, "Would you be willing to sacrifice yourself so that Mira and I could escape?"

Ryu sighed. "For Mira, I would do anything. You on the other handâ€|you must gain my trust before I consider doing anything for you."

Dran nodded, "Fair enough. What would I have to do to earn your trust?"

"Just show that you are worthy of having it," he shrugged.

"That does not answer my question, Ryuâ€|"

"You must do something for me, just as I instruct. If I am pleased with the results, you will have my trust." Dran motioned for him to continue, and Ryu began giving him very strict and elaborate instructions. All Mira could do was shake her head; Dran had no idea what he had gotten himself into.

The next morning, Mira stood by the shield door to keep a lookout for approaching guards. "Well, Mira?"

"It is clear. Nero," she whispered across the hall, "Keep watch that way, would you?"

"Of course Mira, but might I ask what for?"

"I will tell you later." The large male nodded and leaned against the wall, watching the opposite end of the hallway.

Dran was demonstrating some hand-to-hand techniques to Ryu while the guards were on their early-hour patrols. "Twist and pull on the arm, and the bone will separate at the elbow. You will hurt me, but I can just reconnect the joint later."

"Are you sure about this? Surely, there are other ways to get you out of this cell for a few minutesâ€|"

"This way is simple and more likely to succeed. Now, you will likely be put with someone else for this, but we will not forget about you when the time comes. Understand? Do you remember the tale you are going to tell?" Ryu nodded once and Dran held out his left arm, "Begin."

"Right on time," Mira whispered. There was an audible pop before Dran cried out and Ryu tackled him to the floor. "Guard! Guard, get over here," she called as best she could. "The youngling is attacking the newcomer."

The guard growled irritably and unclipped his weapon. "This is the third one this morning. Step away from the threshold!" She complied and the guard rushed toward Ryu. Ryu elbowed the guard in the face when he was grabbed by a shoulder and went back to beating on the struggling form of Dran. Three others ran in and dragged the boy away while the first guard knelt over Dran. "Ughâ€|I knew the boy was excitable, but he was never violent. Damages?"

"The son of a bitch broke my arm. I think he also tore my eye back openâ€|" The guard nodded and hauled him up roughly.

"You are going to the infirmary for a day or so. What did you do to drive him to that point, prisoner? I must know, so I can report it to my superiors and they can pass judgment on the both of you."

"He was taking vengeance on me for slamming his head against the wall, I suppose. Release me, I can walk on my own." Dran told hold of

his broken arm and walked as slowly as he could without being suspicious while he took in the each hall's architecture.

"Magnificent, even for a prison full of your kind, eh? You should consider yourself lucky, prisoner. Even in light of your crime, you were allowed to live a quiet, albeit shamed, life."

"If this is what you call living, you must not get out often," Dran spat.

"Aye, I do not. But, every Sangheili has a duty and this one is mine. I know it is none of my business, but my curiosity often gets the better of me. What did you do, exactly, to earn those scars?"

"I killed an Ascetic and brought his head to the High Council."

"And they did not execute you? That is ridiculous!"

"Glad to see that I am not the only one to think so."

"Ah, but who are we to question? I am sure they had their reasons for convicting you so."

"Indeed." Dran decided to fall silent and ignore the guard's further banter upon gathering enough of the cellblock. He thought that they could, perhaps, take this particular guard down easily enough when it was time to escape. "Or, we could persuade him to help us, if he is being honest about the ridiculousness of my conviction!"

His wounds weren't as bad as he initially thought, and Dran was returned to his cell a few hours later. "By the Gods! what did they do to him?"

"The guards saw fit to judge him themselves," Mira whispered, looking on the battered form of Ryu.

"I'm fine just a scratch," he mumbled through broken mandibles. "Now that I think about it, this was a terrible idea."

"But it worked," Dran assured. "I gathered what you wanted. There are cameras and sensors lining the halls, but they only just above head level; if one of us could get into the rafters and into a security office, we could disable the security in this block and escape."

"Dran, in doing so, we would unlock all of the cells, and some of the prisoners here are well, they are rather violent, to say the least," Mira said.

"True. Try to spread word around that something is going to happen. Perhaps we can gain control amidst the confusion, hmm?" She nodded and promptly whispered across the hall to Nero, and he did the same for the cell next to his, and so on.

"How do you plan on getting me in the rafters without being seen?"

"There is only one guard in this section when the evening meal is brought to our cell, correct?" Ryu nodded, "Is the guard

moreâ€|agreeable?"

"No, not in the slightest."

"Then, just kill him," Dran shrugged. "I want you to make it quick and keep it clean, however; they may be ensuring that we remain in our cells, but they are simply following orders and do not deserve to suffer at our hands."

Ryu sighed. "How should I do it?"

"Break his neck; daze him with a punch, and just sharply turn his head to one side. You should have no trouble, with the strength you have gained." He looked between Ryu and Mira, "I want no more talk about this plan. Do what you must to prepare, but I want us to be ready within the month."

"This is going to be far from easy," Mira mumbled.

"Yes, well, Hell is darker than the darkest night."

End
file.